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WHY MY CHILDREN SPEAK SPANISH

By MRS. MARGARET HILL BENEDICT

IF YOU live in a bilingual country like Porto Rico or in a border region like that along the Rio Grande, there is no particular difficulty about getting a child to speak, read and write well in both languages, although even this is a far greater task than it is ordinarily considered. But when parents who speak two languages come to live in a country where only one is commonly spoken their troubles begin, that is if they wish to have their children speak both languages. In most cases of this sort the second language is either entirely forgotten in a few months or becomes so hopelessly confused in the minds of the children that they are too discouraged and puzzled to take it up again.

A gentleman, himself an educated Mexican, came to the northern part of our country with his American wife and their son, a boy of eleven years. The wife spoke Spanish very well and the boy knew at that time, very little English. Seven years later this gentleman was talking with a Spanish teacher in the city where he was living at that time. He said, "My son will not speak Spanish any more. No amount of threatening or persuasion or promise of reward will make him say a sentence. He seems to hate it." The teacher replied with a question. "What language do you use in the home?" she asked. "Why, English, of course," was the reply, "it seems more natural." "Well then," said the teacher, "how do you expect the child to keep on with anything so difficult as a language with nobody to help him?" How with thousands of people constantly talking English all around him is any child to keep from forgetting even the simplest expressions of a language which he bears only now and then?

Seven years ago, with a little daughter three years old and a tiny baby I left Porto Rico. The older child spoke almost no English although she had been accustomed to hearing that language and understood what was said to her. How was I, among English speaking people, away from the Spanish atmosphere and

the Spanish language, to keep for my daughters this priceless heritage which I felt was theirs by right? Seven years of experience have taught me to answer my own question. My girls understand all that I say to them in Spanish and take pride in answering in that language. The older one is now ten years old and has a better understanding of Spanish grammar than the average high school student after two years study. She reads simple Spanish books and often asks me about the derivation of words. One day I said to her, "Vé al correo a traerme la correspondencia." "Oh! she exclaimed, "Now I see. Correspondence, correspondencia. They are the same." She had never connected the two words before. Little people and ourselves are "half a life asunder" and it is hard for us to realize how slowly we ourselves have learned.

My younger girl read last summer seventy-five pages in a Spanish First Reader and can write simple words from dictation even when she does not understand their meaning. Spanish is a perfectly phonetic language and she knows the sounds of the letters.

The first consideration in teaching a language to a child is one of sentiment pure and simple. The word "amateur" means at the start nothing more than "lover," and by the sublime working of destiny has come to mean "beginner." Where there is no love for a study there can be no beginning. Love, enthusiasm, joy, is the beginning of all progress. If we think of a language as a miserable jargon, if we cannot take the word of wise men and women who assure us that it is beautiful, we are not ready to begin to learn it.

I have found that one of the greatest helps in my work of teaching my children has been the sympathy and approval of friends and relatives. Children, and grown-ups too for that matter, are very sensitive in this matter of a foreign language. An unpleasant laugh, a contemptuous word or even a cold look is enough to discourage a child for days. On the other hand a little applause and sympathy work wonders. The older girls on our street used to take my little girls and coax them to repeat little rhymes in Spanish. These older girls would call a few friends for an audience and gently and tactfully persuade the tots to repeat what I had taught them. "Pussy Cat, Pussy Cat, Where

have you been?" and "One, two, three, four, five, I caught a hare alive," never failed to please and my little ones felt that they had something to give to others just as older children do when they can play or sing.

Another important point is system. Mental labor is not so different after all from sewing or housework. If work is neglected it will pile up. A child should never be hurried or worried, but the work should never be dropped for any length of time.

When we lived in Porto Rico my older girl spoke almost no English. I spoke English to her but she answered in Spanish. When we came to the United States matters were reversed. I began to talk to the child in Spanish. For a short time she answered me in that tongue but as soon as she had American playmates, and American aunts and uncles began to appear she answered me in English. As her Spanish prattle had not troubled me in Porto Rico, so I did not allow myself to be distressed about this English baby talk in our own country. I spoke to her always in Spanish when we were alone and usually in the presence of others. I used to arrange sets of questions for her and teach her the answers. These we repeated every day. I taught her to say, "Good morning" and "Good night," and to ask and answer all the polite and solicitous questions which in Spanish must always be repeated morning and evening.

When this older child was six years old I taught her to read in Spanish during the summer vacation. She learned very well for she could read English in the first reader, but I should have saved her and myself a good deal of unnecessary trouble if I had waited a few months until the English reading was easier for her. Reading is reading and the reading of any language helps a child toward the reading of any other. If they learn first to read the language which they hear most and with which they are most familiar they can learn much more easily the less familiar language. With the younger girl I never attempted any lessons in reading Spanish until she had had thorough drill in English phonics. I then began the Spanish which is much easier because it is phonetic, and she seemed to learn to read it in a day. She always enjoyed those first lessons more than her sister had because she was better prepared for them.

It is a difficult thing for anybody to speak to another in a foreign language when the native language of both is the same.

It is not a question of understanding or of making oneself understood. If you and your son John live in America and hear English all the time and talk English with everybody else, why in the world should you two converse in French or Spanish or Hebrew or anything else? It doesn't seem necessary or reasonable. Difficult as are the other questions in this matter of teaching a foreign language to a child, this is the hardest one of all. The child does not want to seem affected and strange before his friends. His own language seems more intimate and affectionate in the family and more sensible before others. Once in Porto Rico an English woman brought to my school her little son who was at that time eight years old. The child spoke to me in English from the first so that I supposed that he had always spoken it in the home. A few weeks later I happened to mention to the parents that the boy spoke English very well for a child brought up in a Spanish country and both of them were much surprised to know that he spoke it to me at all. They said that although he had always heard it and understood it he had always spoken the other language to them. From that time on they tried to get the boy to speak English to them but he refused and seemed so distressed that they let him speak Spanish for a time. They asked me if I could explain his preference for Spanish and I said that it was clear enough. He had begun to speak at home in Spanish just as every child born in a foreign country will speak first the foreign language if he sees anything of the natives. This beginning established Spanish as the home language for the little fellow and nothing else seemed right. But when he saw me I was a stranger and spoke first to him in English. A precedent was established and in English we went on speaking.

A mother who wishes to speak a foreign language to her children must do more or less acting and must lead the children to play a part more or less unconsciously. In the course of twenty years of teaching Spanish and English I have had many bright pupils. Some did excellent class work, many easily learned to grasp the meaning of spoken or written words, and many enjoyed working along from year to year and gradually increasing their knowledge. But among all the rest a few stand out as simply wonderful, and among these few were two boys of high school age whose talents would have shown in a circus ring. I remember

one, a Cuban, whom I taught from his fourteenth to his eighteenth year. He was bright eyed, handsome, agile as a cat, mischievous and impudent like himself alone. I never could rebuke him because even if I managed to keep a straight face I was inwardly so convulsed with laughter that I dared not say a word. He could mimic in song and speech every Spanish dialect he had ever heard. He seemed to get the particular tone or twang or drawl or impediment of the speech of every man, woman or child that crossed his path. All this he rehearsed at convenient or inconvenient times to delighted audiences in school or church or on the street corner or anywhere he happened to be. English he drank in delightedly in great gulps. He loved the sound of it and the sound of his own voice repeating the strange new words. Before he had been in the United States a year he could help American children pronounce words in the fourth reader and he amazed everybody by the vocabulary he had acquired.

From that experience I learned that acting has a place in the learning and teaching of a language. My talents are in other directions but I have learned at least not to act as if it seemed strange to me to speak to my daughters in the language of another country. If they object as they occasionally must, I argue gently and innocently in Spanish, not in English. If they ask the meaning of some Spanish word in what I have said, I explain in Spanish not in English. Once I said to the smaller one, "Vé arriba a traerme la bolsa de zurcir." "What is 'bolsa de zurcir'?" she asked. "Es el saco donde guardo las medias que tengo que remendar," was the answer. She trotted off immediately and brought the darning-bag.

Last summer was the best that we have ever had together as far as the Spanish is concerned. We were alone in a country place and somehow the girls took to answering often in Spanish. They saw so little of other people. We had lessons from nine to ten in the morning and a neighbor's child was glad to join us. Her mother who was a Porto Rican had died when she was four years old and the child had come north to live with an American aunt. The relatives wanted her to learn Spanish and the child herself was delighted. Once in a while she would remember some word like "grande" or "leche" or "café," but most of it she had or course forgotten. She read in the first reader with my younger

child. After each reading lesson there was a lesson in dictation and spelling. Then followed an oral exercise in which I asked questions in Spanish sometimes about the lesson just read and sometimes about some familiar subject. The girls answered me in complete sentences.

Toward evening we often played games using only Spanish words and expressions. We played "Pussy wants a corner" and "Blind Man's Buff." These happen to be in Spanish, "Lend me some fire," (*Me da candela?*) and "Blind Hen," (*Gallina Ciega*). The little girls ran and laughed and caught up and repeated delightedly everything that they heard me say. "Ven acá, Gallina, aquí está el maíz, y el arroz, Gallinita, y los tomates. Cuidado Gallina, por aquí va el perro. No tropieces."

A few domestic animals are a great help in such a summer class. I used to talk Spanish to the dog and the cat as seriously as if nobody had ever thought of anything different. I used to say, "Quítate del medio, Buck. Qué majadero eres! Ven acá gatita. ¿Tienes hambre? Llama a tu hijo y ven que aquí está la comida." The animals understood quite as well as if the words had been English and the children soon began to repeat all that I said. The dog is a particularly good helper right here for he is such a sympathetic and enthusiastic listener to anything said in a kind tone that the children watch him and shriek with laughter.

When my girls have learned a few stanzas of some Spanish song or poem, we repeat the lines together, taking turns. One repeats as much or as little as she chooses and another takes it up. This never becomes monotonous because each one may say three words or three lines or whatever she wishes before stopping. Any good selection, perfectly memorized is a treasure house of knowledge to a student young or old. From the one little fable, "El Chivo Afeitado," we have in the course of six months, taken up these points; the difference between "quisicosa" and "rompeca-beza," the name "Juana" as applying to womankind in general, the difference between "demanda" and "demand," the galicismo "remarable," why the word "moscovita" means Russian, guitar music in barber shops, the situation of Tetuan and our interest in what is happening there today. A grown person with a fair knowledge of the language could take in all this in one lesson but with a child one proceeds slowly. Every point must seem to

come up by accident. A story at bedtime, a conversation by the brook or in the meadow, a chance reference in some school book, any one of these may give the mother her opportunity to explain.

Now a word about grammar. One feels timid about mentioning that subject now-a-days when the teaching of technical grammar has for so long been regarded with disfavor. Still a few solid facts give me courage to make certain statements. I do not believe in teaching the rules of grammar before the mind can grasp them, that is before there is sufficient knowledge of language for the formulating of rules, but the fact remains that anybody who expects to have a thorough knowledge of any language must reduce his ideas to order. Those pupils from high school age on, who learn the language easily and rapidly have in every case either an instinctive grasp of the rules and principles of grammar, or a good knowledge of these based on the study of Latin and other languages.

As for children, even when taught from their babyhood, they lose nearly all that they have "learned" unless they are systematically taught the parts of grammar suited to their years. I know an intelligent young woman who studied German, her parents' native tongue, for seven years, in public school with good teachers. She studied reading and conversation with no grammar. She had a little later two years of Spanish and about as much Latin with thorough drill in grammar. Today she can write more in Spanish than in German. She says helplessly, "I never learned the conjugations." I had a pupil once, a very bright girl in third year high school who had lived from her seventh to her fifteenth year in Mexico. Her parents were educated Americans but they took no pains to teach her Spanish. She went to a Mexican school and read and studied in Spanish with the native children. Surely this would seem to be an ideal way to learn Spanish. And yet that girl came to me for a course in Spanish grammar for she said that her lack of knowledge in that line made her helpless. She could not read anything but the simplest Spanish and could not write correctly in it, or express herself in any but the simplest conversation.

My older girl was nine years old before I had her look into a Spanish grammar. Before that time she had often conjugated verbs and had formed the plurals of nouns and adjectives but she

had learned no technical names for these exercises. From the time when she took those first grammar lessons she began to answer me in Spanish of her own accord without having to be taught each sentence. The summer in which she reached her ninth birthday she did seventy-five pages in a good logical Spanish grammar, writing all the exercises of English into Spanish. She did this easily and enjoyed it, but there I had her stop until the next summer vacation. She had her constant practice in conversation and seemed to realize for the first time that there are rules for forming sentences and that she could apply them. The next summer the grammar lessons were continued but at the subjunctive we stopped. I felt that it was too heavy for her.

She knows that she must say, “¿Qué quiere usted que yo haga?” and not, “Qué quiere usted que yo haga?” but she knows no such words as “subjunctive” and “dependent clauses.”

So much for the past. For the future our methods will be little changed. We shall read together such things as the girls can understand without translation, not without explanation. We cannot thoroughly understand our own language without constantly reading the works of good authors, and certainly with a foreign language we must make up for the lack of conversation by the reading of good books.

It is now a little more than twenty years since Americans began to take a new and greater interest in the Spanish language and today that interest is still increasing. We are growing more sane too in our attitude toward the work in hand. We hear less and less about “easy methods” and “short cuts” now-a-days. Still once in a while a would-be learner comes to a teacher and says, “Can’t you teach me conversation without grammar?” Yes, we can, when musicians teach piano and violin by ear.

Spanish as a commercial language is more important every day, and with Pío Baroja and Pérez Galdós and Blasco Ibáñez in the land of the living, literary Spanish can only increase the glory that was won for it by Cervantes Saavedra.

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